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ABSTRACT

In the situated learning approach, knowledge and skills are learned in contexts that reflect how knowledge is obtained and applied in everyday situations. As an instructional strategy, situated cognition is a means for relating subject matter to learners' needs and concerns. Four major premises guide the development of classroom activities for situated learning: learning is grounded in the actions of everyday situations; knowledge is acquired situationally and transfers only to similar situations; learning is the result of a social process encompassing ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge; and learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, social environments made up of actors, actions, and situations. Situated learning places learners in the center of an instructional process consisting of content, context, a community of practice, and participation. These four elements offer intriguing opportunities for educators to engage adult learners in novel and meaningful ways by creating environments that foster natural learning processes, selecting situations that will engage learners in complex and realistic problem-centered activities, acting first as content transmitters and eventually as facilitators of learning, and fostering the notion of cognitive apprenticeships. (Contains 20 references) (MN)

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by David Stein

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Situated Learning in Adult Education

In the situated learning approach, knowledge and skills are learned in the contexts that reflect how knowledge is obtained and applied in everyday situations. Situated cognition theory conceives of learning as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than the action of an individual acquiring general information from a decontextualized body of knowledge (Kirshner and Whitson 1997). This *Digest* presents an overview of the concepts related to applying situated cognition in adult learning. It should be noted that situated learning theory has not yet produced precise models or prescriptions for learning in classroom settings.

The Concept of Situated Learning

As an instructional strategy, situated cognition has been seen as a means for relating subject matter to the needs and concerns of learners (Shor 1987). Learning is essentially a matter of creating meaning from the real activities of daily living. By embedding subject matter in the ongoing experiences of the learners and by creating opportunities for learners to live subject matter in the context of real-world challenges, knowledge is acquired and learning transfers from the classroom to the realm of practice. To situate learning means to place thought and action in a specific place and time. To situate means to involve other learners, the environment, and the activities to create meaning. To situate means to locate in a particular setting the thinking and doing processes used by experts to accomplish knowledge and skill tasks (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the adult classroom, to situate learning means to create the conditions in which participants will experience the complexity and ambiguity of learning in the real world. Participants will create their own knowledge out of the raw materials of experience, i.e., the relationships with other participants, the activities, the environmental cues, and the social organization that the community develops and maintains.

A situated learning experience has four major premises guiding the development of classroom activities (Anderson, Reder, and Simon 1996; Wilson 1993): (1) learning is grounded in the actions of everyday situations; (2) knowledge is acquired situationally and transfers only to similar situations; (3)learning is the result of a social process encompassing ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge; and (4) learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, social environments made up of actors, actions, and situations.

These four premises differentiate situated learning from other experiential forms of acquiring knowledge. In situated learning, students learn content through activities rather than acquiring information in discrete packages organized by instructors. Content is inherent in the doing of the task and not separated from the noise, confusion, and group interactions prevalent in real work environments. Learning is dilemma driven rather than content driven. Situations are presented that challenge the intellectual and psychomotor skills learners will apply at home, in the community, or the workplace (Lankard 1995).

Situated learning uses cooperative and participative teaching methods as the means of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge is created or negotiated through the interactions of the learner with others and the environment. Subject matter emerges from the cues provided by the environment and from the dialogue among the learning community. The structure of the learning is implicit in the experience rather than in the subject matter structured by the instructor. Knowledge is obtained by the processes described by (Lave 1997) as "way in" and "practice." *Way in* is a period of observation in which a learner watches a master and makes a first attempt at solving a problem. *Practice* is refining and perfecting the use of acquired knowledge (p. 21). Applied to the classroom, situated learning is not only reflecting upon and drawing implications from previous experiences but is immersion in and with the experience.

Elements of Situated Learning

Situated learning places the learner in the center of an instructional process consisting of ***content***—the facts and processes of the task; ***context***—the situations, values, beliefs, and environmental cues by which the learner gains and masters content; ***community***—the group with which the learner will create and negotiate meaning of the situation; and ***participation***—the process by which learners working together and with experts in a social organization solve problems related to everyday life circumstances (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave 1988; Shor 1987). Learning becomes a social process dependent upon transactions with others placed within a context that resembles as closely as possible the practice environment. Situated learning in the classroom integrates content, context, community, and participation.

Content. Situated learning emphasizes higher-order thinking processes rather than the acquisition of facts independent of the real lives of the participants (Choi and Hannafin 1995). Content situated in learners' daily experiences becomes the means to engage in reflective thinking (Shor 1996). Retention of content is not the goal of learning. By placing content within the daily transactions of life, the instructor, in dialogue with learners, negotiates the meaning of content, frames it in terms of the issues and concerns within the learners, provides opportunities for learners to cooperate in investigating problem situations, and makes content applicable to the ways in which learners will approach the environment. Application rather than retention becomes the mark of a successful instructional encounter.

Context. Learning in context refers to building an instructional environment sensitive to the tasks learners must complete to be successful in practice. Context embraces notions of power relationships, politics, competing priorities, the learners' interaction with the values, norms, culture, of a community, organization, or family (Courtney, Speck, and Holtorf 1996). Boud (1994) describes context as drawing out and using experiences as a means of engaging with and intervening in the social, psychological, and material environment in which the learner is situated. Context is not just bringing life events to the classroom but reexperiencing events from multiple perspectives. Learners are *in* the experience rather than being external to the event (Wilson 1993). Context provides the setting for examining experience; community provides the shaping of the learning.

Community of Practice. Through community, learners interpret, reflect, and form meaning. Community provides the setting for the social interaction needed to engage in dialogue with others to see various and diverse perspectives on any issue (Brown 1994; Lave and Wenger 1991). Community is the joining of practice with analysis and reflection to share the tacit understandings and to create shared knowledge from the experiences among participants in a learning opportunity. Community also refers to the body of knowledge created by an individual entering an area of inquiry. Jacobson (1996) identifies practitioner knowledge and cultural knowledge as communities in which a new member must learn to perceive, interpret, and communicate experience through interactions with

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other members of that community. Community provides the opportunity for the interaction; participation provides the learner with the meaning of the experience.

Participation. Participation describes the interchange of ideas, attempts at problem solving, and active engagement of learners with each other and with the materials of instruction. It is the process of interaction with others that produces and establishes meaning systems among learners. From a situated cognition perspective, learning occurs in a social setting through dialogue with others in the community (Lave 1988). Learning becomes a process of reflecting, interpreting, and negotiating meaning among the participants of a community. Learning is the sharing of the narratives produced by a group of learners.

Orner (1996), a college-level instructor, shares her story illustrating how narratives arising from the lived experiences of students become the data for dialogue and situate the meaning of content for the class. Situated cognition in the classroom becomes the vehicle for students to challenge and intervene in the social constructions imposed by various institutions and political and cultural settings. Orner invites adult learners to engage in "interpreting business as usual" projects (p. 77). The projects are opportunities for students to interpret, intervene, and interrupt the usual happenings of their own experiences. The learning comes about through reflecting on the experience, engaging in dialogue with others, and exploring the meaning of events in a particular space and time, i.e., the context.

Situated Learning in the Adult Classroom

In designing a collaborative classroom for adult learners in a doctoral-level organizational behavior course, Schell and Black (1997) created an environment to foster natural learning processes. Learners engaged in discussion, simulated group activities, and articulation-reflection, verbalizing knowledge gained and comparing problem-solving approaches with that of experts. Schell and Black found variations in the degree of transfer of knowledge and skills from the simulation to the work world due to limitations in the nature of simulation and due to the degree of involvement with the simulation as real. Courtney and Maben-Crouch (1996) found that learning transfers more easily when a "natural learning environment" is created. A natural learning environment engages learners in solving authentic, nonroutine problems likely to be encountered back on the job. Problem solving is collaborative, with participants contributing to the dialogue and constructing novel solutions. Participants are encouraged by instructors to engage in critical reflection, questioning the values and assumptions behind answers suggested by other learners. Knowledge is acquired by framing problems in terms of conditions likely to be encountered on the job.

Young (1993) suggests that instructors should consider four critical tasks when designing situated learning in the classroom. Instructors must select situations that will engage the learner in complex, realistic, problem-centered activities that will support the desired knowledge to be acquired. Instructors must provide a scaffold for new learners, that is, know the type and intensity of guidance necessary to help learners master the situations. As learners acquire additional skills, less support will be needed. Instructors recast their roles from content transmitters to facilitators of learning by tracking progress, assessing products produced by learners, building collaborative learning environments, encouraging reflection, and helping learners become more aware of contextual cues to aid understanding and transference (Ottoson 1997). The last task is continually to assess the intellectual growth of the individual and the community of learners. In the adult classroom, the instructor fosters the notion of cognitive apprenticeships (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989). Learners observe how instructors solve problems and develop their own solution paths. The tools of cognitive apprenticeship include discussion, reflection, evaluation, and validation of the community's perspective.

The main elements of situated cognition—content, context, community, and participation—offer intriguing opportunities for instructors to engage with learners in novel and meaningful ways. Situated cognition reminds us that adult learners are a rich and diverse source of stories, data that can transform the classroom from a source for transferring knowledge from instructor to learners to a resource for interpreting, challenging, and creating new knowledge. Interactions among the learners and the environment holds the promise of having learners directly intervene in and change the processes that surround their lives at home, in the community, and at the workplace.

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